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ABSTRACT

Although the literature suggests that large budgets can be equated with successful public relations, a study that involved personal interviews with 27 public relations executives in Alabama's state colleges and universities and a telephone survey of 1,250 Alabama citizens concluded that individuals know their supporting publics well because of their continued motivation to do so, regardless of financial support. Educational public relations administrators from institutions with high level funding who displayed low accuracy in perceiving their supporting publics' views on current issues did not engage in a great deal of communication with members of those publics. Successful implementation of listening behavior seems to result in public relations success regardless of administrative structure. (AEA)

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Public Relations and Higher Education: A Coorientational Analysis

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The use of coorientational models to examine communication systems has florished during the past several years. The general model of interpersonal coorientation, based mainly on the work of Newcomb,[1] was introduced as a set of criteria by Chaffee and McLeod and nas continually been refined.[2] Studies using the coorientation criteria range from communication within families to larger systems such as communities, social service agencies and university student bodies.[3]

There have been no studies reported in educational public relations that analyse coorientation between university administrators charged with public relations responsibilities and members of the tax-paying public. This study describes an analysis in a survey of one public (Alabama taxpayers) and several University administrators (to include Alabama, Auburn, University of Alabama in Birmingham and University of Alabama in Huntsville). This system has been examined unilaterally by measuring administrators' perceptions of their supporting publics views on current issues, but not vice versa.

From the point of view of this study, the most profitable model is that of McLeod and Chaffee.[4] Their general model of coorientation involves a fundamental paradigm, in its most general form, consisting of a system of cross-perceptions and beliefs between two human beings. The interpersonal model allows for distinguishing two sets of evaluative cognitions which each actor in the model is assumed to have: each character is assumed to know what he thinks about a given object and to have some idea of what the other person thinks about the "same" thing.

Three variables (agreement, congruency and accuracy) are proposed to account for the relationships between these two sets of evaluations. Agreement is the extent to which two characters eventually agree upon the object on which they are both focused. Congruency is the perceived agreement between two persons, or the extent to which one

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[1]T.M. Newcomb, "An Approach to the Study of Communicative Acts," Psychological Review, 60:393-404 (1953).

[2]Jack McLeod and Steven Chaffee, "Interpersonal Approaches to Communication Research," American Behavioral Scientist (March-April, 1973), 16:469-499.

[3]See James Grunig, "Evaluating Employee Communication in a Research Operation," Public Relations Review, 4:61-82, 1977; James Grunig and Keith Stamm, "Communication and Coorientation of Collectivities," American Behavioral Scientist, (March-April, 1973), 16:567-591, and; Glen Broom, "Coorientational Measurement of Public Issues," Public Relations Review, 4:110-119, 1977.

[4]Op.cit.

person thinks the other agrees with him. Accuracy is the correctness with which they perceive each other's appraisal of an object or topic.

In this study each administrator is looked upon as one person and aggregated members of the tax-paying public as another. The topics within the system consist of three current issues which were facing the state of Alabama legislature in the form of controversial bills introduced during the session in which the study was conducted. The bills proposed to (1) lift the restriction which provided that 80% of every dollar of state tax revenue would go toward education; (2) centralize the control of all state supported higher educational institutions within the state, and; (3) provide level funding (no increase in expenditure) for all state colleges and universities. Since this study is primarily concerned with the overall patterns of coorientation rather than the particulars of Alabama state politics, the data for the three issues have been combined.

The Administrative Survey. Personal interviews were conducted with each of 27 executives employed by Alabama state supported four-year colleges and universities and selected junior colleges. (The administrators functions primarily consisted of public relations and public information responsibilities.) Administrators were asked their opinions on each of the three issues and were also asked to estimate the distribution of public opinion.

Following the formal portion of the interview, open-ended discussions were conducted with each administrator regarding his/her attitudes and opinions of state policies and reaction to survey questions. Administrators were also asked to explain the methods used to reach the public and methods used to listen to taxpayers.

The Public Survey. The main objective of the public questionnaire was to determine the level of awareness and corresponding opinions of the public with regard to the three issues. A total sample of 1250 citizens was obtained via telephone surveys.

The study analysis was conducted in two parts. The first stage consisted of an examination of the demographic variables which were hypothesized to control the structure of the university-public relationship. The second stage of the analysis dealt with other factors such as the image of universities as presented in the media and methods used to communicate with members of the general public.

Measurement. Three separate measures were taken from the data on the three issues. The first measure, overall deviation (from accuracy, agreement and congruency) was derived by taking the differences from the three response categories (pro-pro, con-con, neutral-neutral), squaring them, summing the quantity and then calculating the square root of this sum of squares. This overall measure is non-directional and takes into account deviations in either direction, treating them as absolute deviations from agreement, accuracy and congruency. In addition, the overall deviation quantity represents the extent of disagreement, non-congruency and inaccuracy, rather than the obverse, since the measure reflects a difference between two distributions.

The second measure, neutral deviation, is a directional deviation which takes into account whether or not the administrator underestimated or overestimated public opinion. This deviation is obtained by taking the difference of the two neutral categories of response in each of the two distributions and ignoring pro and con categories of opinion. A minus quantity indicated the administrator had underestimated the number of individuals who hold no opinion or are neutral with regard to the particular issue. A positive quantity indicated the opposite.

The third quantity, preponderant deviation, is a directional measure and ignores all neutral opinion by comparing the ratios of pro and con in the administrative and public distributions. In addition, this sign also expresses a deviation from the administrators' point of view. A positively signed quantity indicated the preponderant view held by administrators was more favorable toward a selected issue than the view held by the public; a negative signed quantity indicated the administrators were less favorable than the public.

To demonstrate the three operational definitions, consider the following example:

	Administrative Estimate of Public Opinion	Public Opinion
Pro	56%	54%
Con	27%	39%
Neutral	17%	7%

Preponderant accuracy is the difference between the two ratios of non-neutral opinion (56-27 and 54-39). Converting these to bases of 100 each, they become 67% and 58% respectively. The administrator has overestimated the public support for the issue by 9%, preponderantly speaking, so the table entry would be +9%. Next, he also overestimated the percentage of the public holding no opinion by 17-7 = 10%. The table entry would be +10% in this case. Finally, the overall inaccuracy is based on the sum of the differences squared: $(2)^2 + (12)^2 + (10)^2 = 4 + 144 + 100 = 248$. The square root of this sum is 15.748, which is the index that would be incorporated into a mean value to be entered into the appropriate cell of the data table.[5]

Process and Structural Variables. The first section of this analysis focuses on demographic variables which might control the structure of the communicatinn system between public relations administrators and the public. The second stage of the analyses concentrates on some aspects of the communication process within the structure.

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[5]See M.B. Hesse, "Legislative Public Relations," Proceedings of the American Academy of Advertising, Spring 1979, 170-176.

Only two demographic variables appeared to have a significant impact upon the pattern of coorientation, although a number of structural variables (seniority, urbanity, budget level, and institutional size-enrollment) were run against the dependent variable (coorientation variables).

In principle, seniority of the administrators (number of years in the position) could yield a continuous distribution for statistical analyses, but those performing public relations tasks for Alabama colleges and universities are a very stable group. During the survey year, slightly less than one-half of those interviewed on college campuses (thirteen) has held their jobs for long periods of time (ranging from eight to fifteen years). The remaining administrators had not been on the job very long at all (ranging from three months to three years). Accordingly, the groups were divided into high and low seniority.

Budget level, a measure of the institution's funding level for the public communication task, proved less complex. Budget lines for public information were identified as a percentage of the institutional (operating, salary and equipment) budgets for each campus examined. Comparisons were made, and budgets were categorized as being high, medium or low. The distribution was, however, clearly bimodal. There were 19 low budget levels and 8 high levels.

The analysis revealed two process variables which demonstrated a significant impact upon the pattern of coorientation. Five process variables were examined (Table 1): (1) the extent of listening activity by administrators, and (2) reporting inconsistency displayed the highest correlations to the dependent measures. The listening index sought to measure listening behavior of administrators and the extent to which they actively seek values and opinions from members of the public before making policy considerations. Those exhibiting a high degree of listening activity were categorized as diachronic communicators[6] (information seeking to assess a common problem, which generally precedes information giving, to propose a solution to the problem or seeking accuracy).

This variable was measured by asking administrators to respond to a number of items designed to reveal the extent of their listening behavior ("Do you survey the publics of the university to determine opinion on issues?... Do you participate in civic gatherings/ organizations to observe and solicit opinion on issues?"). Responses to the items (sometimes, always, never) were weighted and summed to produce an index of listening activity.

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[6]See also Lee Thayer, Communication and Communication Systems, (Homewood, IL: Irwin Publishers, 1968). Thayer discusses synchronic and diachronic communication in depth.

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Table 1

Coorientation Coefficient Matrix for Accuracy*

Total Deviation from Perfect Accuracy	Accuracy	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Media Exposure (1)	.44								
Professional Status (2)	.51	.48							
Reporting Inconsistency (3)	-.53	.52	.33						
Synchronic Communication (4)	.41	.42	-.41	-.43					
Diachronic Communication (5)	-.69	-.66	.59	.68	-.43				
Structurial Variables									
Budget Level (6)	-.41	-.38	.31	.40	-.31	.38			
Seniority (7)	-.39	-.38	.40	.32	.21	.49	.50		
Urbanity (8)	-.40	-.44	.36	.26	.20	.38	.32	30	

(more)

* Negatively signed quantities indicate an universe relationship to total deviation from perfect accuracy.

Media Exposure: The amount of coverage given to institutions. High scores represent high coverage.

Professional Status: The extent of policy responsibilities in public relations (organizational clout). A higher quantity reflects a higher status within the institution.

Reporting Inconsistency: Dissimilarity between reported opinion of the institution and stated institutional opinion gathered in the survey. Higher scores represent higher amounts of inconsistency.

Synchronic Communication: "Sending" communication of institutions. A higher score reflects a greater presence of this behavioral mode.

Diachronic Communication: "Listening" communication behavior. A higher score reflects a greater presence of this behavioral mode.

Reporting inconsistency was measured by determining what articles selected from state newspapers reported the institutions as saying (regarding the three study issues) and then measuring the dissimilarity between the reported opinion and the stated administrative opinion (gathered in the survey).

Results. The biserial correlation coefficient was used to analyse the data. All the variables, with the exception of the dependent measures, were non-normally distributed.

Overall deviation from perfect accuracy, agreement and congruency is shown in Table 2. The larger the number in that table, the greater the amount of disagreement, noncongruency and inaccuracy. Because preponderant and neutral deviation from the coorientation variables did not show any appreciable difference from the overall deviation computations, they have been eliminated from the analysis.

Accuracy. Table 2 indicates that low budget administrators, as a group, are quite accurate, both in assessing the preponderance of opinion within their target publics and in estimating the degree of issue neutrality. The high seniority low budget group, which is also closest to its publics in terms of agreement, is particularly accurate. Administrators with less seniority tend to be less accurate. With the exception of the high seniority low budget group, there is a definite tendency to underestimate the extent to which the public holds no opinion on the issues.

Agreement. Table 2 also indicates the extent of disagreement between the administrators and their estimates of the public views. Overall agreement tends to be the highest in the group of administrators who have enjoyed high seniority within a low budget environment. This occurs primarily because they are closest to their publics both in the preponderance and in the degree to which they remain neutral or undecided on some issues.

Congruency. The pattern of congruency is rather consistently similar to that of the agreement data. Where non-congruency is relatively high, so is disagreement.

The low budget high seniority group stands out, this time seeing itself as closer to the public. Almost without exception, the administrators underestimate the degree of disagreement between themselves and members of the general public. For the total sample, the preponderance of noncongruency is a difference of only 6% (they are a net of 6% more favorable to the bills that they estimate the preponderant number of their target publics to be).

The data from the structural variable analysis seems to indicate that closeness to one's target publics is predictable from both budget level and seniority. If one looks at the budget level of an institution as a facilitator to communication, but seniority as a possible outcome of the communication process, it would seem that low-budget administrators differ from their counterparts in two

Table 2

Overall Deviation from Perfect Accuracy, Congruency and Agreement between Institutions and the Public, by Structure

	Inaccuracy		NonCongruency		Disagreement		Row Mean
Seniority:	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	
Low Budget	9	2.0	43.9	30.5	55.6	33.6	29.1
High Budget	36.9	30.1	42.8	37.1	54.1	55.8	42.8
Urbanity	38.9	33.6	43.4	38.1	56.1	51.3	43.6
Column Mean	28.2	21.9	43.3	35.3	55.3	46.9	38.5

respects. First, they have very accurate perceptions of their target publics views; secondly, as length of time in their position increases, their opinions come more into line with those of their target publics. Administrators with high funding appear to maintain their seniority by increasing their accuracy in estimating public views, rather than by coming more into line with public opinion.[7]

Reporting Inconsistency. Table 3 indicates there is a negative relationship between reporting accuracy and administrator accuracy. These administrators achieving low accuracy scores reside in areas where media reports of administrative/institutional issue position are highly inaccurate.

The data for agreement and congruency (Table 4) were similar. Those administrators displaying high disagreement and noncongruency with their publics, resided in areas where media reports were more consistent with administrator/institutional statements on the issues.

These findings run counter to the existing literature.[8] It may be that those administrators who possess a high ability to assess public opinion do not choose to use the media a great deal, and when they do the coverage is inconsistent with their institutionally stated views; this may lead them to intentionally avoid the media in certain cases.

Diachronic Communication. This variable showed the greatest relationship to the dependent measures of coorientation (Table 1). Administrators who were measured at being highly accurate engaged in high amounts of listening communication activity. Those who listened little were highly inaccurate. Of those who engaged in medium amounts of listening communication behavior, the great majority of them engaged in high input communication.

The results of the congruency and agreement data were, once again, similar. Administrators who achieved high disagreement and high incongruency with members of the public engaged in little listening communication behavior.

Communication Pattern Control - Structure Vs. Process. The data indicate the structural variables account for a moderate amount of

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[7]See Floyd Bevers, "The Relationship Between Public Relations Practices and Enrollment Patterns in Area Vocational Secondary Schools in Texas,"; Julie Lejuene, "Determining The Effect of Public Information Activities on Vocational Enrollment in West Virginia," and; Albert Van Dusen, "Program Development and Public Affairs at the University of Pittsburg," in Educational Abstracts, G.P.O., 1980-81.

[8]Ibid.

Table 3

Administrative Inaccuracy and Reporting Inconsistency

Reporting Inconsistency	Inaccuracy		
	High	Medium	Low
High	2	6	7
Low	6	4	2

N = 27

x^2 .05,2 = 20.419 (significant)

Table 4

Administrative Disagreement and Reporting Inconsistency

Reporting Inconsistency	Disagreement		
	High	Medium	Low
High	2	6	6
Low	5	5	2

N = 27

x^2 .05,2 = 12.67 (significant)

variance in the dependent variables of coorientation. However, the correlation coefficients of budget level, seniority and enrollment show a much weaker relationship than that of the process variables (Table 1), so the structure probably does not determine the pattern of coorientation.

The partial correlation between diachronic communication activity and accuracy with budget level controlled is .63. The partial correlation between diachronic communication activity and accuracy with seniority controlled is .63 (with enrollment controlled it is also .63).

It should be stressed the study hypotheses regard association and imply covariation, not causation. The results of the partial correlation coefficient analysis (first order) indicate there is a strong tendency for those exhibiting listening communication activity to reside in low budget level situations, but working with a smaller budget does not cause the listening oriented behavior. One would suspect that transplanting a low-budget listening-oriented administrator into a higher funding setting would not produce sending (or synchronic) communication behavior.

Discussion. The educational public relations environment in a low-budget setting is one of high surveillance. These administrators become quite accurate in their evaluation of the public, and opinion agreement seems to become a pre-condition to job continuance.

Administrators with larger budgets, on the other hand, do not display the same sensitivity to members of selected targetted publics of the institution. They enter their positions about as discrepant from the views of their publics as their new counterparts, but they seem to stay that way. Perhaps successful perception of publics relies more on individual motivation to perform the skills of the public relations practitioner than it does on budgeted funds to facilitate the implementation or performance of those skills.

It may also be that those with well-funded operations spend a great deal of time on elaborate sending devices, and less time on forms of low-cost, informal opinion surveillance. Expenditures for sophisticated equipment and four-color process print packages may be easier to justify and explain, than less precise forms of public relations listening activity.

Seniority is closely related to the ability to perceive public opinion; it seems the way to maintain longevity is to come closer into line with public opinion on issues, as is exhibited by those displaying high accuracy. Those administrators from high budget campuses (highly inaccurate) display higher degrees of agreement and congruency but have less clout within the organization. As a rule this group is low in seniority. However, there are administrators within this group who possess higher seniority, but they also demonstrate higher accuracy.

Table 5

Administrative Inaccuracy and Listening Communication

Listening Communication	Inaccuracy		
	High	Medium	Low
High	1	8	7
Low	8	2	1

N = 27

x^2 .05,2 = 15.79 (significant)

Table 6

Administrative Disagreement and Listening Communication

Listening Communication	Disagreement		
	High	Medium	Low
High	2	10	4
Low	5	1	5

N = 27

x^2 .05,2 = 16.05 (significant)

Those administrators engaging in high amounts of sending communication activity are not very accurate in estimating district opinion, but are in agreement with the public on the issues. These administrators usually possess low seniority, and it would seem seeking agreement is not sufficient to establish longevity in office. Simply sending out news releases to the media, speaking to civic groups and talking with interested supporters does not insure longevity. Even though these individuals are able to perceive agreement quite well, they are highly inaccurate in estimating true opinion. This may be due to the fact they do not listen to their publics - they only offer information.

The successful administrators (in terms of longevity of position) are those who engage in great amounts of listening behavior. This group of administrators is highly accurate in estimating public opinion, even though they may think their estimates are off. Typically, these administrators regularly generate public opinion polls and meet with members of the general public and listen to them speak producing a setting of high surveillance.

It should also be noted that the location of the institution (i.e., the urban or rural nature of the environment) apparently has no bearing on the degree of accuracy of administrators nor on the type of communication activity behaviors which are exhibited. This runs contrary to conventional wisdom (rural areas are more homogeneous, thus making it easier to target audiences and to communicate).

Conclusion. What seems to surface then, is a description of the significant attributes of successful educational public relations (if success can be measured on the basis of accurate perceptions of targetted publics). High seniority administrators in Alabama typically reside in low-funded settings and exhibit, from the beginning, a desire and ability to accurately assess public opinion. Their counterparts (those measured as being highly accurate) appear to extend their seniority by increasing their accuracy in estimating public opinion rather than by coming to agree with them.

According to the results of the partial correlation coefficients, the pattern of coorientation is more likely controlled by the nature of the communication process within the public relations environment.

These findings do not support previous literature that media reporting will be consistent with administrative views where administrators are highly accurate. It is also interesting to note that in areas where administrative inaccuracy is high, media reporting is consistent with the personal views held by administrators. Once again, perhaps the ability of the media to accurately reflect administrative/institutional opinion leads these individuals to rely more heavily on mass coverage (because it's well done) and sending procedures and to ignore more time consuming methods of interpersonal communication which would increase their coorientational abilities. Again, the data bear this out. This study has demonstrated that those administrators from institutions with high level

funding and who display low accuracy are not engaging in a great deal of communication with members of the public. Perhaps it is untrue, as suggested by the literature, that large budgets can be equated with successful public relations. It seems more believable that individuals know their publics well, only because of their continued motivation to do so, regardless of financial support. Some administrators may find it difficult to observe and target public values due to the heterogeneous nature of their publics, thus making surveillance of a multiplicity of opinions a relatively harder task than in more homogeneous areas. However, successful implementation of listening behavior seems to result in public relations success regardless of structure.

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FOOTNOTES

[1]Bevers, Floyd, "The Relationship Between Public Relations Practices and Enrollment Patterns in Area Vocational Secondary Schools in Texas."

[2]Broom, Glen, "Coorientational Measurement of Public Issues," Public Relations Review, 4:110-19, 1977.

[3]Grunig, James, "Evaluating Employee Communication in a Research Operation," Public Relations Review, 4:61-82, 1977.

[4]Grunig, James and Keith Stamm, "Communication and Coorientation of Collectivities," American Behavioral Scientist, (March-April, 1973), 16:567-91.

[5]Hesse, M.B., "Legislative Public Relations," Proceedings of the American Academy of Advertising, Spring 1979, 170-76.

[6]Lejuene, Julie, "Determining the Effect of Public Information Activities on Vocational Enrollment in West Virginia."

[7]McLeod, Jack and Steven Chaffee, "Interpersonal Approaches to Communication Research," American Behavioral Scientist, (March-April, 1973), 16:469-99.

[8]Newcomb, T.M., "An Approach to the Study of Communicative Acts," Psychological Review, 60:393-404 (1953).

[9]Thayer, Lee, Communication and Communication Systems, (Homewood, IL: Irwin Publishers, 1968). Thayer discusses synchronic and diachronic communication in depth.

[10]VanDusen, Albert, "Program Development and Public Affairs at the University of Pittsburg," Educational Abstracts, G.P.O., 1980-81.